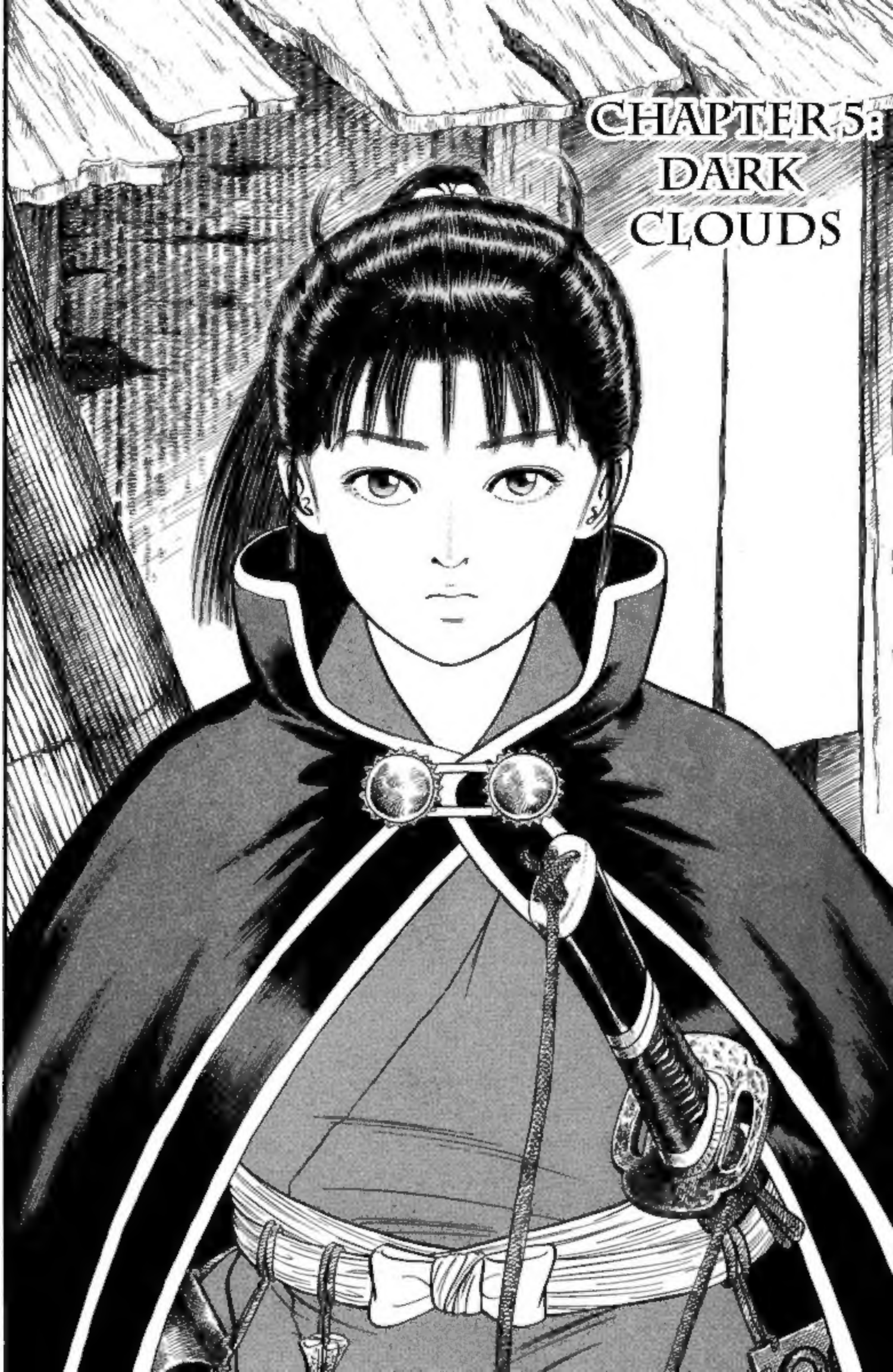
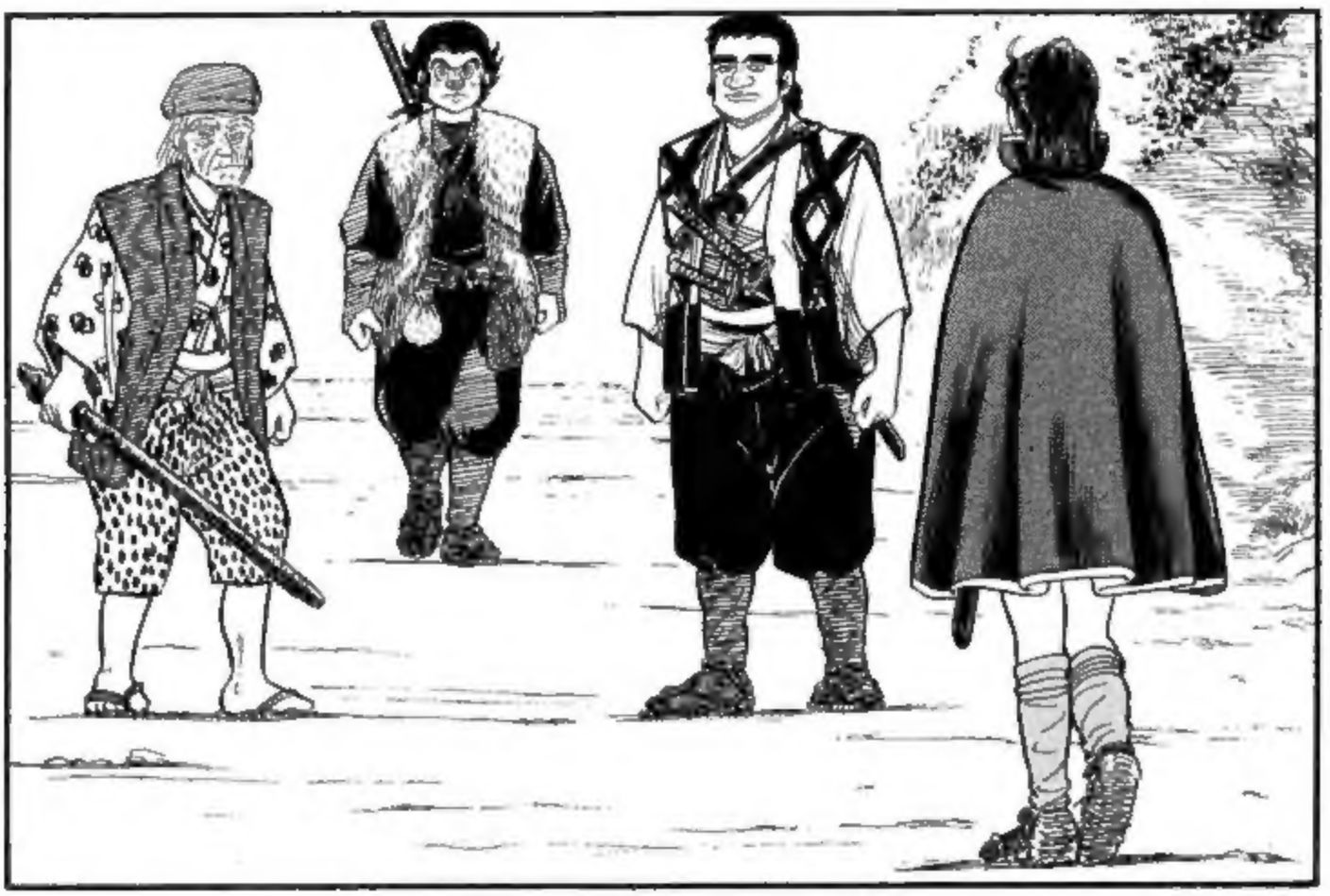
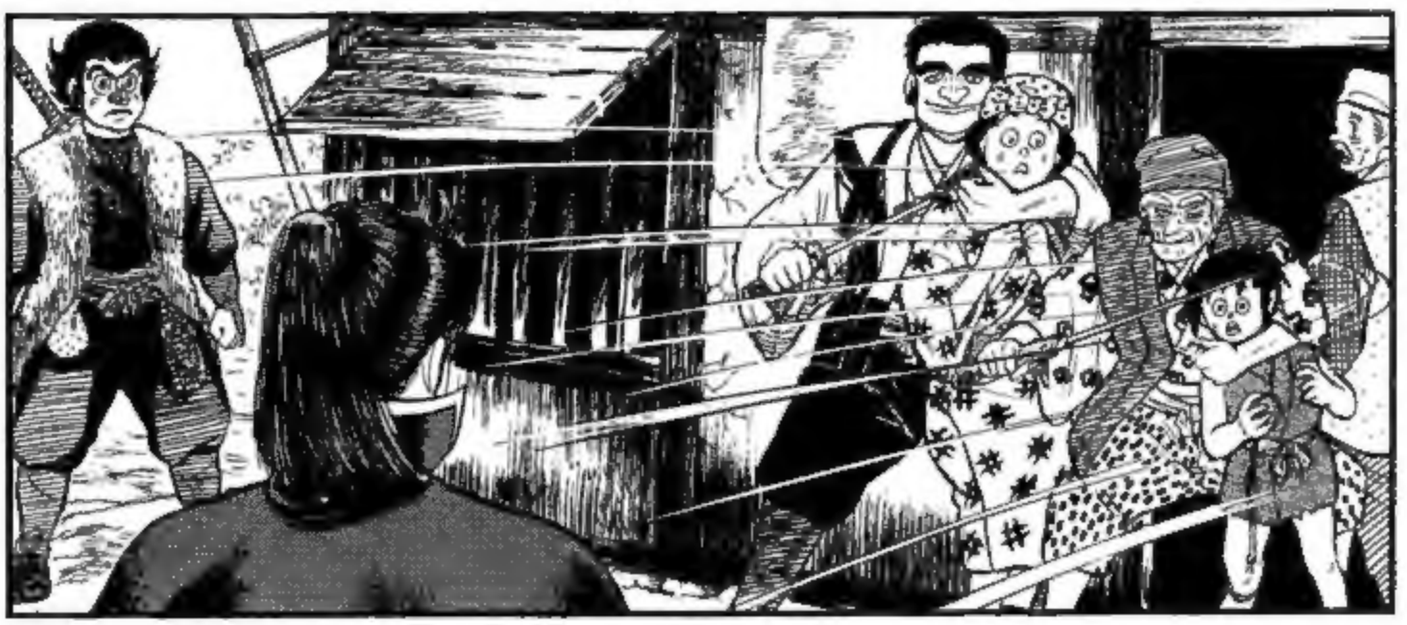

CHAPTER 5:
DARK
CLOUDS





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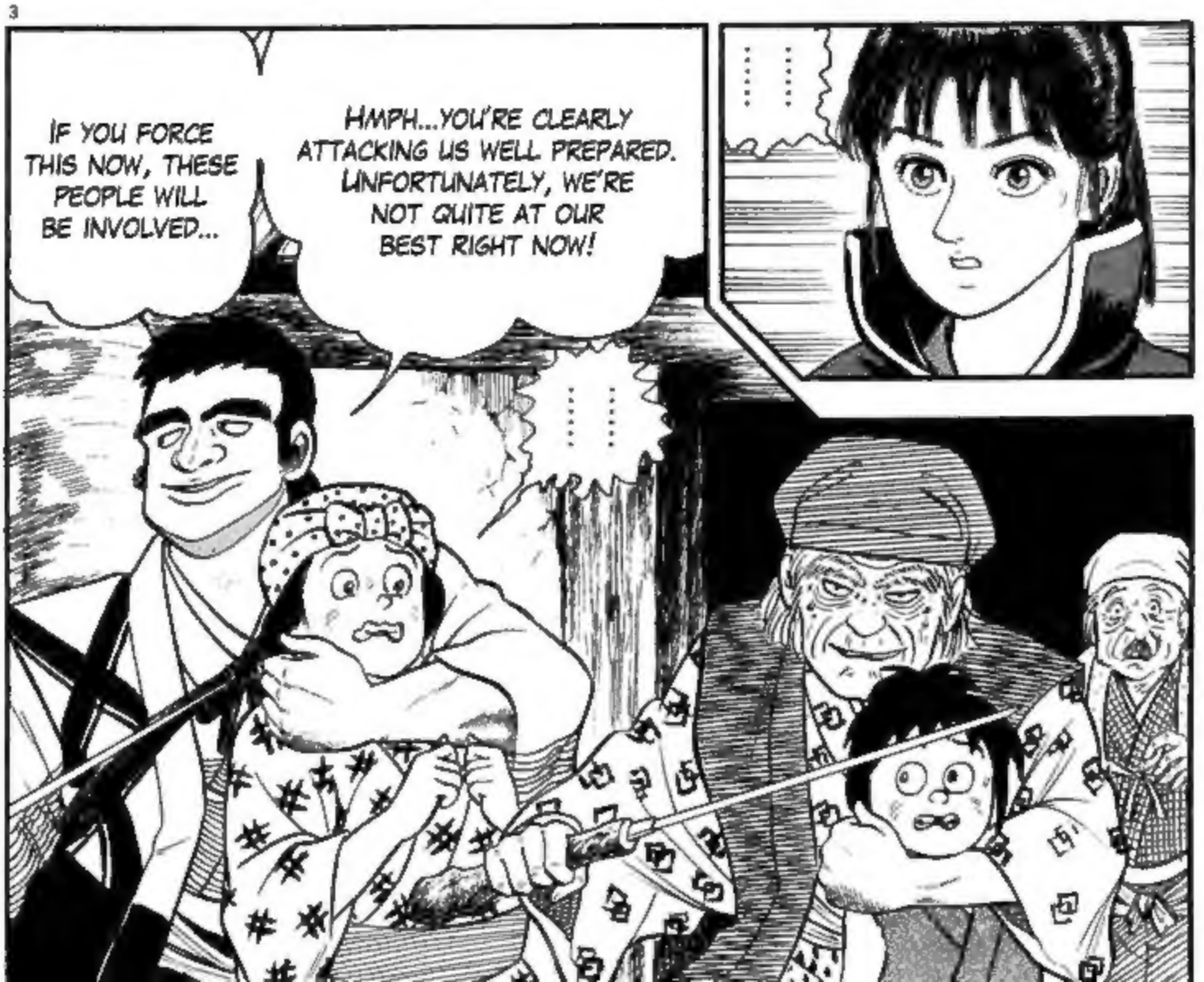

IF YOU FORCE THIS NOW, THESE PEOPLE WILL BE INVOLVED...
HMPH...YOU'RE CLEARLY ATTACKING US WELL PREPARED. UNFORTUNATELY, WE'RE NOT QUITE AT OUR BEST RIGHT NOW!
.....
.....

IT'S MY WISH TO SETTLE THIS AT ANOTHER TIME AND PLACE THAT YOU DECIDE!
JUST TELL ME NOW! WHEN AND WHERE!?
HA HA HA
HA HA HA
HA HA HA
はははは
わはははは
WAH HA HA

SURPRISE ATTACKS ARE A SHINOBI'S SPECIALTY!
ARE YOU A FOOL!?

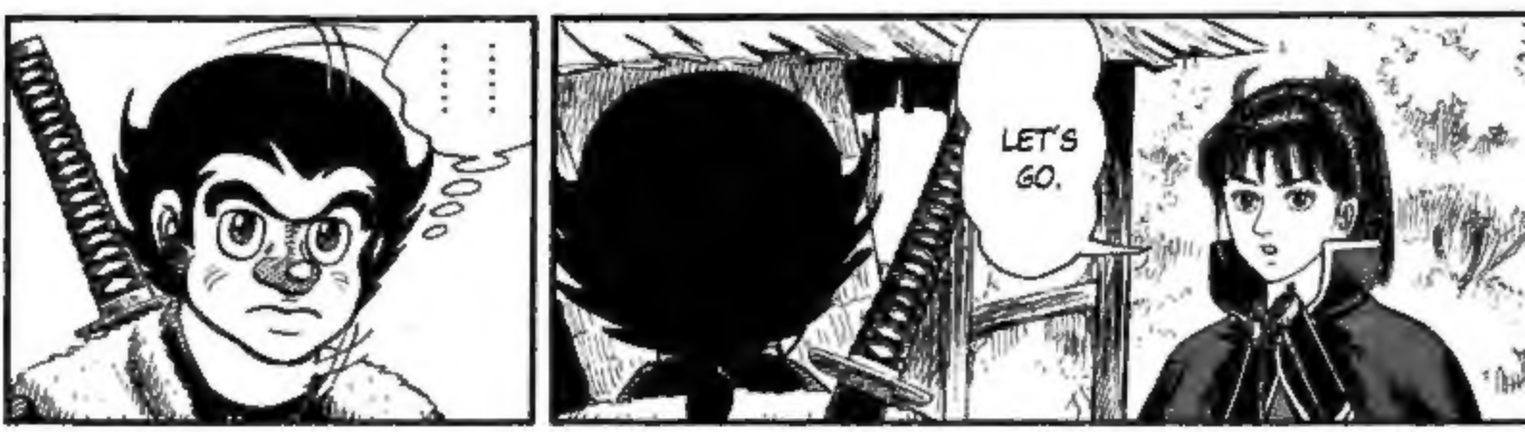
THOSE ARE YOUR ONLY OPTIONS!
WHILE YOU WALLOW IN FEAR, DAY IN AND OUT, THROUGH SLEEPLESS NIGHTS, NEVER KNOWING WHEN OUR ATTACK MAY COME!?
OR WILL YOU GIVE UP AND LEAVE?
DO YOU WANT TO TRY TO KILL US HERE NO MATTER HOW MANY INNOCENT PEOPLE WILL BE SACRIFICED?

WHAT'RE YOU GONNA DO!?
AHHH... PL-PLEASE SAVE US!

WHAT WILL YOU DO, AZUMI?
YOU'LL KILL THEM HERE, WITH NO HESITATION, RIGHT?

……

SINCE YOU LACK ANYTHING RESEMBLING PRIDE, IT'S OUR LOSS THIS TIME.
I CHOOSE TO AWAIT YOUR SURPRISE ATTACK.


.....
LET'S GO.

I'M SORRY.

EHHH...? AZUMI WAS HOPING TO DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT?

IT'S UNREASONABLE TO THINK YOU CAN SWAY THEM INTO A FAIR DUEL, AZUMI.
OUR OPPONENTS AREN'T PRIDEFUL FENCERS, BUT SHINOBI WHO MOVE AND ACT IN THE DARKNESS.

.....
IF WE DON'T INNOCENTS WILL BECOME VICTIMS IN THIS SOONER OR LATER.
SHOULDN'T WE GO WITH A SURPRISE ATTACK, TOO?

IT'LL BE A SERIES OF SURPRISE ATTACKS FROM BOTH GROUPS!
FROM NOW ON
FROM THOSE TWO THAT THEY'RE ALL BEING TARGETED.
ANYWAY... NOW ALL THE OTHERS WILL KNOW

NO, IT WAS A PLAN I WENT ALONG WITH AS WELL!

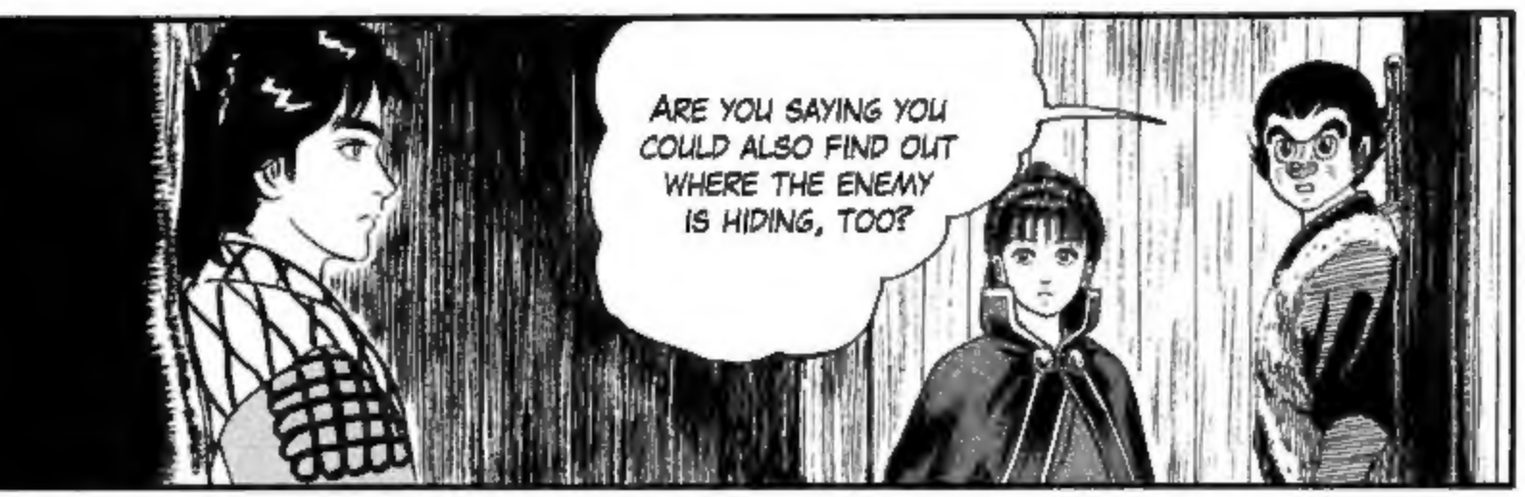
.....

FORGIVE ME. I MADE A TERRIBLE MISTAKE.
I'VE BEEN OVERLY OPTIMISTIC.
I WILL NOT ALLOW ANY INNOCENT PEOPLE TO BE HARMED!

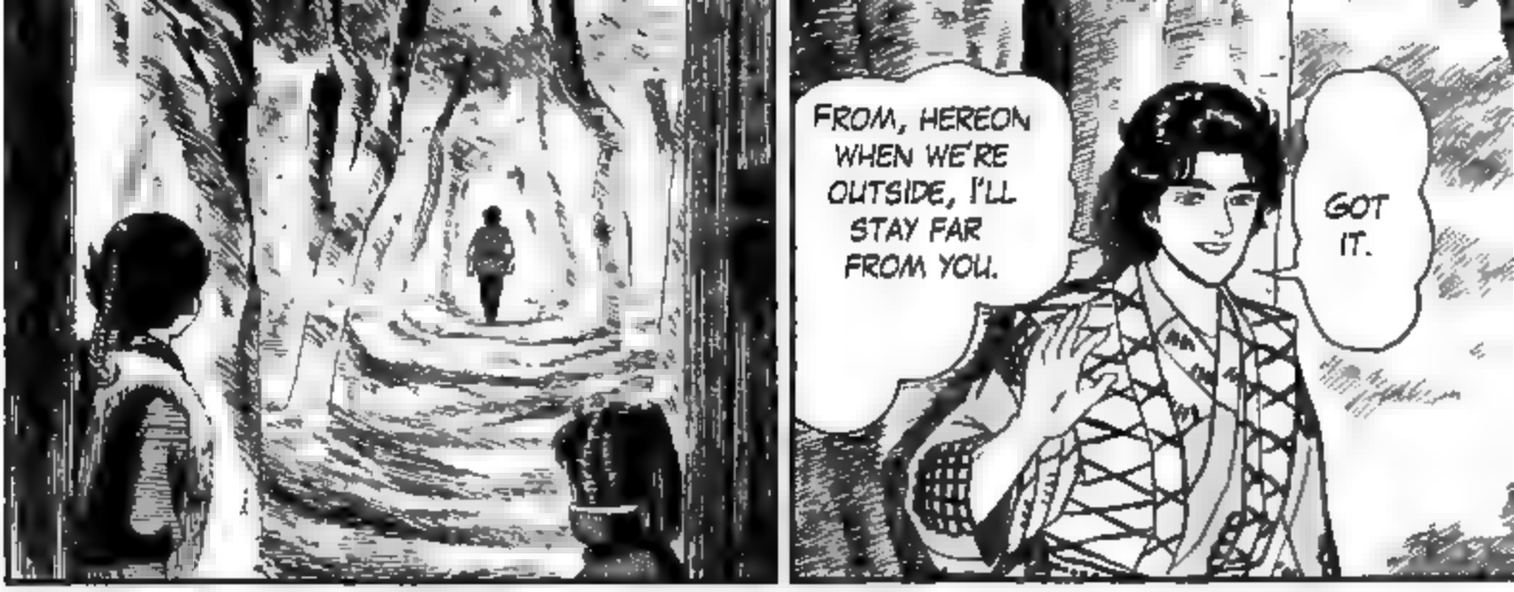
HYŌSUKE-DONO, IF YOU WERE SEEN TOGETHER WITH US-!

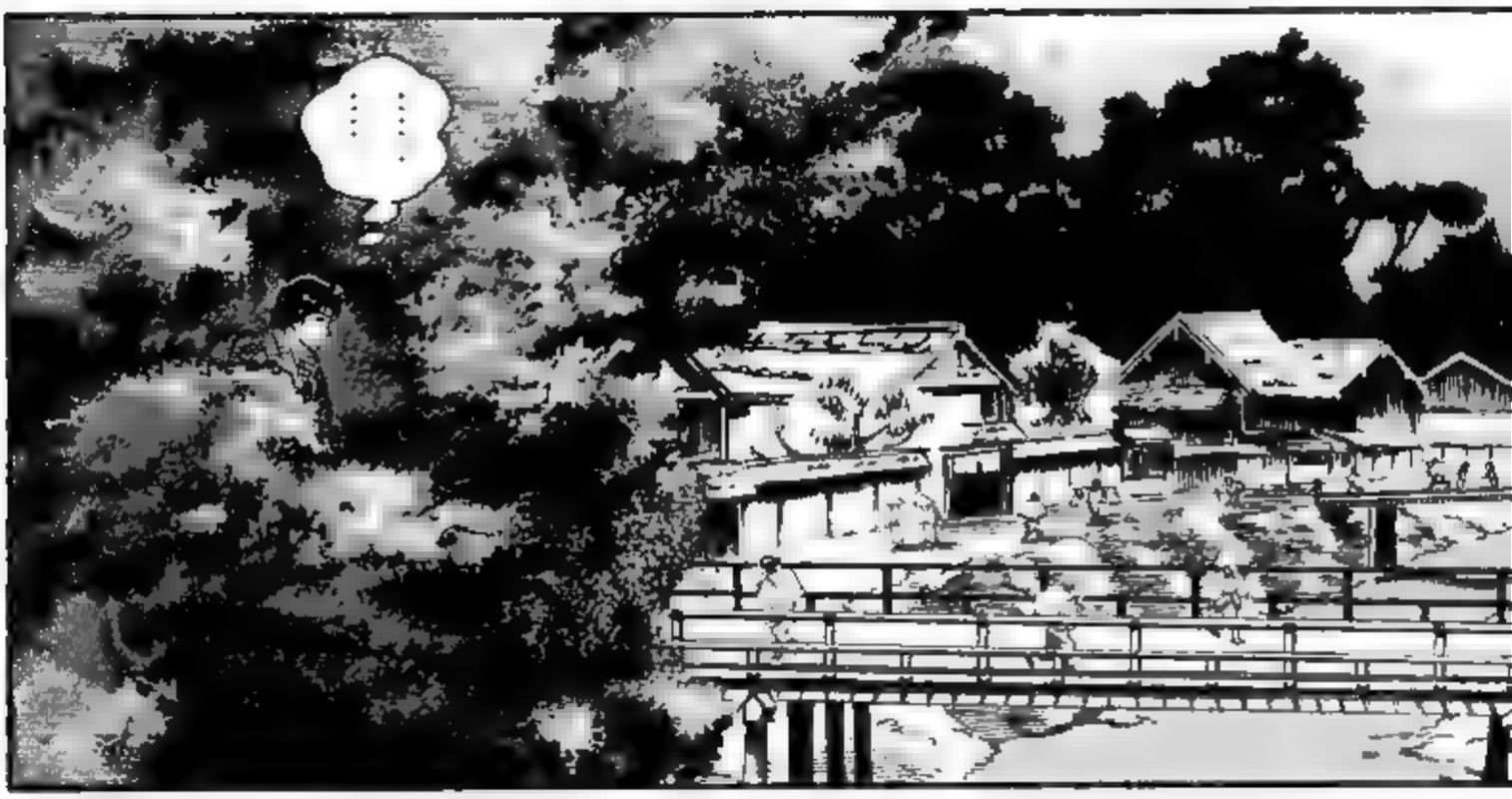
AH!

IN THAT REGARD, I ALWAYS WATCH FROM A DISTANCE, WITH GREAT CAUTION.
IT'S FINE.
YOU SHOULD HIDE!
YOU'LL BE A TARGET AS WELL!


ARE YOU SAYING YOU COULD ALSO FIND OUT WHERE THE ENEMY IS HIDING, TOO?

IT'D BE OVER FOR US AS WELL.
IF YOU WERE TO DIE BEFORE TELLING US ABOUT THOSE THIRTEEN,
SAY WHAT YOU WANT, BUT YOU'RE TOO CONFIDENT IN YOUR EYES ALONE.


FROM, HEREON WHEN WE'RE OUTSIDE, I'LL STAY FAR FROM YOU.
GOT IT.


.....

QUIT APOLO-GIZING ALREADY.
I'M SORRY, TOBIZARU.

SHE'S A WOMAN WHO'S HARD TO READ...
AZUMI...HAVE I MISUNDERSTOOD HER A BIT...?

GROOOWL

HAHA HAH!
.....

LET'S DO WHAT YOU SAY!
AHAH HAHA HAH!

ALRIGHT! LET'S HAVE LUNCH!
EVEN IF HE'S FOND OF BLUFFS, TŌTA'S STOMACH IS HONEST!

IT IS!
SHOULDN'T IT BE READY BY NOW?

LATELY, ALL WE'VE HAD IS MILLET PORRIDGE.

THAT'S TRUE! IMPORTANT TO REM-EMBER!
IT'S ALL THE MILLET WE HAVE TILL WE GET BACK.
IT ISN'T MUCH, SO WE HAVE TO MAKE IT LAST.
HERE, MASTER!

WOULD IT BE ALRIGHT TO CATCH AND EAT FISH AND SHELLFISH, MASTER?
SEEMS WE'LL BE ARRIVING NEAR THE SEA SOON.

RIGHT! I GET IT!
IF YOU DO THAT, IT'S FINE!
AND CATCH THEM WITH YOUR OWN HANDS!
AS LONG AS YOU'RE CAREFUL NOT TO HINDER THE LOCAL FISHER-MEN!
OH, PLEASE DO!
I'LL CATCH A LOT FOR YOU, BIG SISTER!
CATCHING FISH AND SHELLFISH IS MY FORTE!
.....
HAHAHA!
SURE!
CAN I HAVE SECONDS!?

YES.
HIKO-ZA.
YES.
MO-ICHI
WHAT IS IT, MASTER?
YES.
KOCHŌ AND TŌTA.
AND YOU'VE ALL GROWN UP WELL!
YOU'VE ALL ENDURED HARD TRAINING AND IMPROVED.
REMEMBER THAT YOU'RE THE PRIDE OF OUR VILLAGE!

WE WANT TO WORK AS SHINOBI!
RIGHT!
WE WANT TO WORK JUST AS HARD AS MASTER AND GRANDFATHER HAVE ONE DAY!

ME, TOO!
FIRST OF ALL, I'M GONNA SHOW YOU THAT I'M GONNA DISTINGUISH MYSELF WHEN THE TIME COMES TO INFILTRATE EDO CASTLE!!

WE MUST RETURN TO A SOCIETY WHERE THESE CHILDREN CAN GAIN REWARDS THAT MATCH THE GREAT DEEDS THEY ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR!
THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG IN THIS SOCIETY IF CHILDREN LIKE THESE WHO TRAINED SO HARD WITH SUCH BRAVERY CAN'T EVEN EAT RICE FOR A MEAL!!

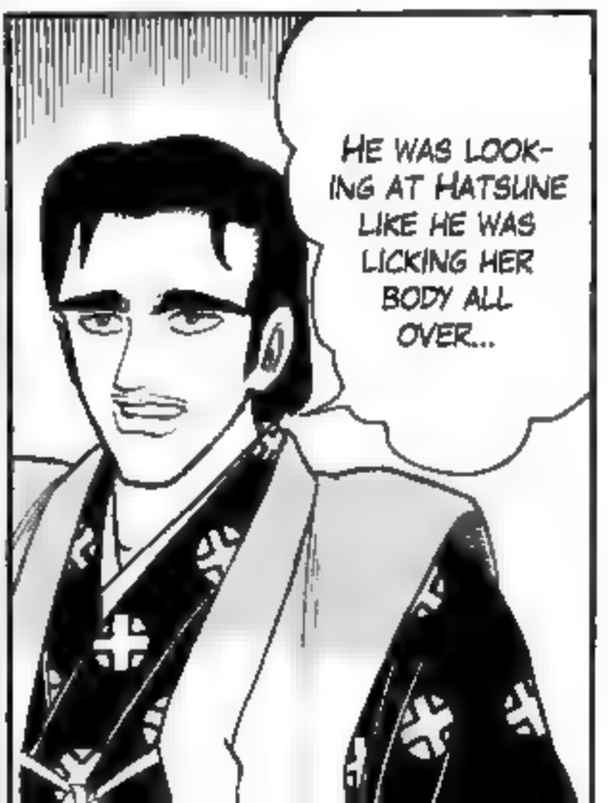
THAT KIND OF STRATEGY SEEMED TO WORK WELL WITH THE TARGET. AS FOR ME, I WAS JUST THERE AT THE START.
YES SHE'LL HANDLE THE REST.
HATSUNE-SAN? ALONE?

THAT UGLY MAN SEEMED LIKE A LECH, AFTER ALL.
IT WENT WELL!
YEP.

SO, SHE MANAGED TO APPR-OACH HIM?
.....

.....

.....


HE WAS LOOK-ING AT HATSUNE LIKE HE WAS LICKING HER BODY ALL OVER...

HE WENT TO SEE IF HE COULD SPOT OTHER TARGETS. IF HE FINDS ONE, HE SAID HE'LL COME HERE TO CONTACT US.
WHAT OF HYŌ-SUKE?

OOOH, IF IT ISN'T OUR COMRADE, KUROKAWA GENGO!

KŌSAKA-DONO I SEE YOU ARRIVED WITH ATTENDANTS?
COMING TO WELCOME US WAS SO KIND OF YOU, KUROKAWA-DONO.

ASSASSINS FROM THE SHOGUNATE ARE AFTER US.
YOU WERE RIGHT.

JUST IN CASE, WE DISGUISED OURSELVES AS A STREET PERFORMERS' TROUPE...

HUH!?

I SEE...SO WE'VE BEEN ALREADY DETECTED BY THE SHOGUNATE...
ALL OF YOU.
JUST AS YOU HEARD.
BEFORE WE EVEN NEAR EDO CASTLE, THE BATTLE BEGINS IN THIS LAND!

AYE!
THIS WILL BE YOUR FIRST REAL FIGHT!

FINALLY, FOR THE FIRST TIME...
USING THE BUJUTSU YOU'VE GAINED TO THIS POINT,

YES!
YOU'RE GOING TO KILL YOUR ENEMIES!

YOU'RE PLENTY STRONG!

DON'T BE AFRAID!

WE'LL KILL THOSE SHOGUNATE BASTARDS!
WE AREN'T AFRAID! NO, WE'RE EXCITED!

WE'LL SHOW YOU THAT WE'RE GONNA WORK HARD USING THE BUJUTSU YOU TAUGHT US!!
PLEASE WATCH US, MASTER!

.....

.....
HMPH!

HATSU-
NE-
SAN!
HATSUNE-
SAN IS
BACK!

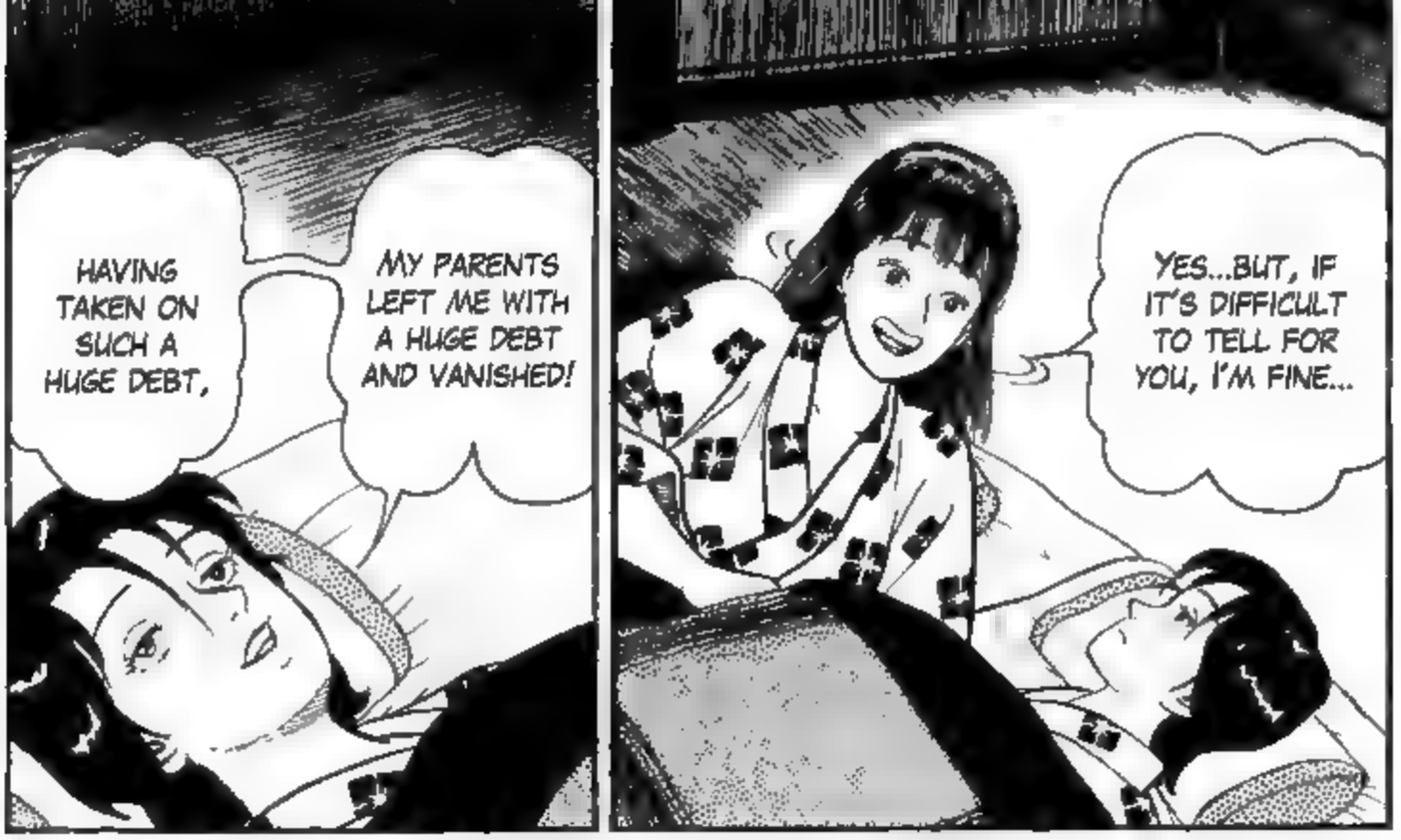
PHEW!
OH...SO-SO...
MAYBE.
SO, HOW
DID IT
GO?

.....
THINGS ARE GONNA BE DECIDED TOMORROW EVENING, I GUESS .

HOW SHOULD I APPROACH AZUMI?

YA WANNA KNOW!?

HOW DID YOU END UP APP-ROACHING HIM!?


HAVING TAKEN ON SUCH A HUGE DEBT,
MY PARENTS LEFT ME WITH A HUGE DEBT AND VANISHED!
YES...BUT, IF IT'S DIFFICULT TO TELL FOR YOU, I'M FINE...

I RAN AWAY WITH ALL MY MIGHT! THAT'S THE SCENARIO I CAME UP WITH!
I TOLD HIM I'D BEEN SOLD AS A PROSTITUTE.

I-I'M BEING CHASED...P-PLEASE, O NOBLE SAMURAI, HELP ME...!

SO...DID HE HELP YOU?

AND THEN?

SO HIS FACE WAS ALREADY SAYING HE EXPECTED QUITE A BIT FROM ME IN RETURN...
YEP! THE TARGET'S A BIG, UGLY, GREASY MAN, YOU KNOW!

IF I HAD GONE ALONG WITH THE TARGET'S SECRET MOTIVES, NO MATTER WHAT THE CIRCUMSTANCES MAY HAVE BEEN, I WOULD'VE LOOKED SUSPICIOUS TO THOSE TWO BODYGUARDS, RIGHT?
SOOO ...
I KEPT UP WITH THE WORDS OF GRATITUDE.
AND THEN I SKILLFULLY RETREATED!

"I HAVE NO HOME I CAN RETURN TO."
"AS I FEARED, ALL I CAN DO NOW IS BECOME A PROSTITUTE."
"I DON'T CARE WHAT HAPPENS TO ME NOW."

THE TARGET WAS TAKEN A BIT ABACK...

I'D RETURN THE FOLLOWING EVENING TO THANK HIM AGAIN!
SO I TOLD HIM,

I'LL APPEAL TO HIM WITH THE FRAIL SORTA LOOK...

AND WITH AN UGLY FACE LIKE THAT
THERE'S NO DOUBT WOMEN AIN'T USUALLY FOND OF HIM!

AND THEN I'LL GET HIM!

WHEN I SLEEP WITH HIM, THOSE TWO GUARDS WON'T BE AROUND.

.....
.....

WHAT WEAPON WILL YOU USE THEN, HATSUNE-SAN?
.....
THAT'S WHEN HE'LL BE AT HIS MOST VULNERABLE.
HE'LL BE ABOVE ME, PANTING, WITH THE FACE OF A FOOL.
NOW, THAT'S A SEEEEC-REEEET!
HEHE HEHE HEHE!
29
.....